

Omnibus interviews

Natalie Haynes



Writer and broadcaster Natalie Haynes studied Classics at Christ's College, Cambridge. She is the author of *The Ancient Guide to Modern Life* (2010), *The Amber Fury* (2014), which was short-listed for the Scottish Crime Book of the Year award, and *The Children of Jocasta* (2017). She has written and presented the BBC Radio 4 show *Natalie Haynes Stands Up for the Classics*, and was a judge for the Orange Prize for Fiction (2012), the Man Booker Prize (2013), and the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize (2014). She was awarded the Classical Association Prize in 2015 for her work in bringing Classics to wider audiences.

What made you study Classics?

I had really great Classics teachers at school. People come up to me at shows all the time and tell me they wish they'd had a better Latin teacher at school, and my heart always cracks a little, because it's obviously too late to fix that now. But I was absurdly lucky to be taught Latin and Greek and Ancient History by three people who were clever and funny and committed to making their students love Classics as much as they did. So I took triple Classics A Levels and then studied it at uni, and never looked back.

From Classics to stand-up Comedy: how did that happen?

I always wanted to be a comedian in some ways: I loved comedy when I was a teenager. And I was always funny. Sometimes I was a little mean in the pursuit of being funny, which I try not to be now. But (again, luckily for me...) Cambridge has a long history of producing comedians through The Footlights, the university's comedy society. I started doing stand-up in my second term and then I made my living as a comedian for about twelve years after that; it seems insane now, but I had a great time.

What made you turn to writing?

I guess I was always writing. It's just that for a long time I was only writing jokes and routines to perform onstage. As time went on, people asked me to do different kinds of writing: I started doing op-ed

columns for *The Times*, and then *The Independent*. I also started reviewing books and films and plays for the BBC, and that spread into more cultural criticism. My non-fiction book, *The Ancient Guide to Modern Life*, was inspired by a column I wrote for *The Times* about modern politicians and Roman emperors. But I had always aspired to write fiction, so when the opportunity arose, I seized it.

Tell me about *Amber Fury*. What made you want to write about Greek tragedy from the perspective of a group of troubled teenagers?

I think teenagers fit perfectly with Greek tragedy (certainly, I did when I was young). The moral and emotional absolutes seemed completely familiar to me when I first read *Medea* and *Hecabe* and *Antigone*. I find I see the world in less tragic terms now I am older. But since I still want to write tragedy, teenagers keep appearing in my work. Mel, one of the main characters in *The Amber Fury*, finds a lot of what she needs in Greek tragedy: it speaks to her in a way that other things do not. In this regard (though thankfully not many others...) she is a lot like me. I think there is something elemental in tragedy which teenagers often understand instinctively. The rest of us have to imagine our way into that way of thinking.

Your latest novel, *The Children of Jocasta*, recasts *Oedipus Tyrannos* and *Antigone* from the perspectives of Ismene and Jocasta. What influenced that decision?

It really felt like the obvious thing to do. To be honest, I was kind of surprised no-one else had done it already. *Jocasta* only has 120 lines in *Oedipus Tyrannos*, Ismene only has 60 lines in *Antigone*. So the characters were there, but in the shadows a bit (particularly Ismene). It meant I could imagine pretty much whatever I liked into the gaps where these characters' lives were: most of their existence is not onstage in the plays from which we know them, if that makes sense.

I believe all myth operates in two time-zones, the one in which it is set and the one in which it is written. It seems to me to be both a very Bronze Age thing to have

women at the centre of the story (Bronze Age women had a lot more freedom – at least in myth – than e.g. fifth-century Athenian women), and a very 21st-century thing. My novel definitely tips its hat to Greek tragedy too, so I hope you can sense a third timeline in there as well: Bronze Age characters, refracted through the prism of Sophocles, and then put on the page by me. That was the goal, anyway...

What was the hardest part in writing your novel?

All of it is hard! I guess I really care about the structure of a novel (or any story, actually), so that's the thing I work on first. Once I have the shape of the book in my mind, I start fleshing out the details, the characters, the world. The actual day-to-day, sit-at-your-desk-and-write-1000-words bit is the fun part (mostly). The key thing to remember is that there is – for me, anyway – little correlation between how easily the words come and how good they are. Sometimes it feels like pulling teeth, and it is astonishing to read it back the next day and discover that something which felt so miserable is quite good. Other times, it comes so easily and I find myself deleting 500 words at a stroke when I read it back. It came easily and it went easily....

What are your plans for the future?

I have finished the first draft of my new novel, which I think will be called *A Thousand Ships*. It's the story of the Trojan War, told from multiple perspectives of the women whose lives are changed or destroyed by it. It was a bleak thing to write at times (though the scenes with Athene and Aphrodite and Hera were a lot of fun to do). That will come out in spring 2019, so I have to do some editing between now and then. I'm recording the fourth series of my Radio 4 show, *Natalie Haynes Stands Up for the Classics*, in May and June. It'll go out at the end of July and into August. And then I owe my publishers a non-fiction book on Greek Myth, so I should probably start work on that. I'll write a live show to go with the novel and be out on tour for most of 2019, I suspect (as happened last year with *The Children of Jocasta*). Can I call the talk *Troy Story*? Or is that too silly?